



FIONA MILLAR

UNNATURAL SELECTION

SEGREGATING CHILDREN AS A RESULT OF AN ARBITRARY ACADEMIC TEST TAKEN AT THE AGE OF TEN OR 11 NEVER MADE ANY SENSE, ARGUES FIONA MILLAR – SO WHY ARE WE STILL DOING IT?

Last month's local and European election results appear to have sent a shock wave through our political system. But might there be a little silver lining in what many of us see as the UKIP dark cloud if the debate about grammar schools is forced back onto the political agenda?

There is no doubt that the case for all ability schools has largely been won. Even the Conservative Party has dropped its historic commitment to creating more grammars. Yet the 11 plus test is still being used in a quarter of all local authority areas, fifteen of which are fully selective. So UKIP's pledge to create a 'grammar school in every town' provides an opportunity to set out the anti selection case loud and clear, and to explain why existing academic selection should be outlawed forever.

The arguments for selection are well known: grammar schools are 'excellent'; they allegedly give a ladder up to working class children while comprehensive schools (apparently) push them down. They are thought to be popular.

But these are all myths. Of course grammar schools get better results than many of their neighbours. This is because they overwhelmingly admit academically able pupils from affluent families. There is no evidence whatsoever that they enable better progress for all children. In fact the OECD /PISA data so popular with the current Secretary of State shows beyond doubt that the most successful systems in the world – those with good achievement across the board and narrow gaps in attainment – don't divide children by ability.

Meanwhile the claim that grammar schools benefit pupils from less advantaged backgrounds doesn't bear scrutiny either. It is largely based on the anecdotal stories of a few high profile public figures who were educated at grammar schools in the post war years, without establishing how typical they were.

The Crowther Report in 1959 was commissioned to look into this. It found that children from professional or managerial homes were disproportionately represented in selective schools and those from semi skilled or unskilled families were under-represented and more likely to be at secondary moderns. These children were also less likely to stay on in school and go to university.

The situation is even worse today. The proportion of children eligible for free school meals in the remaining grammar schools is around 2% compared to a national average of 15%. Where it still exists selection simply entrenches social segregation. Even the Chief Inspector of Schools Sir Michael Wilshaw



FIONA MILLAR IS A COLUMNIST FOR GUARDIAN EDUCATION AND A CO-FOUNDER OF THE LOCAL SCHOOLS NETWORK. (LOCALSCHOOLSNETWORK.ORG.UK).

"WEALTHY PARENTS CAN TRUMP EVERY OTHER CHILD'S CHANCES OF A PLACE BY PAYING FOR PRIVATE TUITION..."

recently felt moved to state that grammar schools were "stuffed full" of middle class children and did nothing for social mobility

Why? Because wealthy parents can trump every other child's chances of a place by paying for private tuition. This is such a problem that fully selective Bucks is desperately trying to find a tutor-proof test, though in reality no such thing exists.

And comprehensive schools haven't failed. This argument is usually promoted by people who have never been in a comprehensive school and don't use them for their own children. At the height of England's fully selective system in the late 1950s only 9% of 16 year olds achieved five O levels. Almost two fifths of grammar school children failed to achieve more than three O level passes. Today almost three quarters of pupils pass five good GCSEs and around six times as many go on to university as in those supposed good old days.

Any party toying with the idea of reintroducing selection across the board should remember that comprehensive schools came into being because the grammars were loathed and resented by middle class parents who felt their children had been stamped failures at 11; in the post war 'tripartite' education settlement it was not uncommon to read about 'gold, silver and metal' children.

The champions of selection will quickly realise that they must explain to the majority of parents, now accustomed to 'choice', that under their system it will be schools that choose, that most children will indeed start their secondary school careers having failed their first major test, and that they will be educated in secondary modern schools which, however good they are, will inevitably be seen as inferior.

Moreover that decision will be down to an arbitrary test which some children will take aged ten even though the latest neuro-science tells us that young people's brains, and intelligence, continue to develop in adolescence.

Those of us who will fight the anti selection corner robustly have no desire to 'abolish' any schools, which conjures up images of institutions being razed to the ground. We want to gradually change the way they admit their pupils, so that every child can have the benefit of a good comprehensive education rather be subject to a 'sheep and goats' mentality that should be consigned to the history books once and for all.

